

"The Elephant Is," Kim Ode, Star Tribune, Minneapolis. *Hyperlink jump to following copy:*



a little about...

Kim Ode writes about the personal issues that arise from a wide variety of events, whether the stuff of headlines or the more ordinary incidents of everyday life. Her columns appear in the Variety section on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays.

Kim Ode: The elephant is ...

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We all have our own version of reality. It's the notion that inspired the tale of the six blind men who felt an elephant and came away with six different conclusions. It's what makes a glass appear half-full or half-empty. It's why men think it's logical to leave the seat up and why women fall in. So it is with Iraq. The reality of what happened there, and is happening there, depends upon who's talking about it.

That became clear this week when I sat at Marnita's Table. Actually, I perched on a windowsill in her Minneapolis living room, listening to an extraordinarily diverse gathering of people. That's the idea behind Marnita Schroedl's get-togethers -- They're a 21st century salon, with some interesting cultural collisions.

On this night, the idea was to trade perspectives on religion with a delegation of Iraqis touring this country through the U.S. State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program. We never got to that conversation, although we may have gotten much farther. Of course, that depends upon your view of reality.

We never got to religion because of another issue in the room that loomed as big as, well, an elephant: Was the United States right to invade Iraq? And more narrowly, where were the weapons of mass destruction?

These questions could not be ignored. After all, here we were in the same room with a general in the Ministry of Defense who once was an air vice marshal in Saddam Hussein's military, and who spent time with Saddam in his war room. Another guest was a cleric who guides more than 100 imams and preaches to thousands as director of an ayatollah's office. As with many in the room, each had his view of reality.

From the general: There once were weapons of mass destruction; he was vehement on this point. And although they had been destroyed by 1991, the invasion was justified because Americans could not be expected to believe the weapons had been destroyed until they saw for themselves. The Iraqi people, grateful for Saddam's overthrow, would welcome U.S. military bases.

From the cleric: Americans cannot imagine how terrible life was under Saddam, and international sanctions could never have removed him from power. Still, while Iraqis are grateful, Americans must not think they can remain a presence in their country.

From an Iraqi-American: The war was wrong, and, while Saddam needed to be overthrown, the man was overcome with sadness when he visited his homeland and saw the results of the ill-planned invasion and the tumult that persists.

From a spokesman for a Minnesota medical company: Americans feel lied to because the stated justification for war was not that the Iraqi people needed freedom, but that we were in danger of being attacked by weapons of mass destruction. We only shifted the focus from ourselves to the Iraqi people when the weapons could not be found.

Once that was on the table, there was no moving on. The discussion flew around the room, over plates piled with roasted lamb and fruited rice. *You said the weapons had been destroyed years ago ... Yes, but they once existed ... Our leaders shouldn't have lied to us ... But, you needed to make sure ... But so many Iraqis have died ... We welcome you ... You must leave ... Do you understand our anger? ... Do you understand our joy?*

Some of the native Minnesotans worried over the vehemence. Guests from Pakistan and Croatia and Lebanon by turns engaged and sat back. All had such conflicts in their history and knew that realities differ when it's your family on the line. The talk went on for hours.

It was humbling to hear the depth of the Iraqis' emotion as they talked about Saddam's overthrow. It was disconcerting to hear them disagree among themselves, yet heartening that they do, just as we do here.

Schroedl organizes these evenings through an organization that she founded with her husband, Carl Goldstein. It's called Under One Sun (UPDATE: NOW KNOWN AS MARNITA'S TABLE), which we all are, although we rarely are reminded of that reality. She had urged us to find what we hold in common, and the freedom to raise objections may be one thing.

The willingness to keep talking through our differing realities is another. After all, a water glass can be defined by its halves for only so long. On the way to understanding each other, someone eventually will replenish it so that another can satisfy their thirst.